

Communications Guidance for Churches



What makes a good media story and how do I share it?

Comms and PR is often seen as being about getting on the Tele or Radio. Some of my favourite PR TV characters are immortalised in the likes of In the Thick of It and W1A. Who can forget the brilliant rants of Malcolm Tucker a simply abhorrent character who was the Prime Minister's official Director of Communications in the series – apparently allegedly based on the real life Alistair Campbell DOC for Tony Blair (and played by a wickedly funny actor Peter Capaldi). The level of PR spin and media management was more than enough to put you off PR forever.

Sadly for the most part, the job is not quite so glamorous – forget the lunch parties, brainstorming, nail polish and waste of public money on branding, we all witnessed in the BBC Two series W1A about PRs in the BBC. The reality for most of us working in any communications role in public services, institutions or charities is trying to identify solid PR opportunities to engage local newspapers and regional news desks where increasingly staff numbers are declining and there's a general level of ignorance particularly about anything like religion.

In just under 23 months in the role, I thought it might be helpful to share a few tips that I've learnt along the way about writing church stories for wider public interest – what I mean by that is writing a story that might get published in the local newspaper, online paper or open the door for a radio or TV interview. If you're a trained journalist then please ignore this, I'm sure you'll do a fine job of writing without my 'listorial' (that's cheap editorial for creating a list):

What's the angle?

Journalists want to know very quickly what the story is about so make it clear up front in your press release.

What will interest a journalist?

Think about the medium you are planning to pitch this story to – each one is slightly different and if you simply lump print, TV and radio altogether you'll miss the opportunity. If you're writing for print, particularly the local newspaper, try to do as much of the work for them. If you're pitching this story at radio or TV a short paragraph is often enough to gauge interest and you can then move from there to build the full story, spokespeople, provide the facts and recording opportunity.

A good story has three parts a beginning, a middle and an end. In the trade, we call it a narrative arc. This means it runs through five stages and this can be applied to pretty much every well written article, radio piece, TV segment that you read, hear or see. There's the incident or event (which we call the enticing incident), then there's the second part, what you did (this we call the rising action), the third part is 'what happened' (this is referred to as the climax and leads into part four which is the falling action), lastly there's the 'what it meant to people/the legacy' (often called the resolution).

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Example: A Ringer of a Story

If you break down your story, are you able to answer the “so what?” question. Let me give you an example:

You’ve recently refurbished the church bell(s)
– Can you answer the question why this is of any interest to a journalist? No, I don’t simply mean you’re proud of it or it’s been a big investment by the PCC, aren’t we marvellous. Who cares about that?

Sorry, I’m being a bit brutal but if there’s one thing that I’ve learnt over time, it is that behind every story that people think is the story, there’s always a more interesting people angle to discover. So now try and tell me why your refurbished church bell is of interest to a journalist.

Yes, you’ve got it, the gentleman who led the campaign has rung the bell since he was 15 years old. He has got out of bed up 6 am every Sunday morning since the Second World War (in Europe) ended in 1945. He’s now 86yrs old and still ringing the bell every Sunday morning calling people to worship. Following a recent inspection of the church, the bell was found to be unsafe and in need of refurbishment at a cost of £XXX. The PCC could only provide 50% of the costs but a quick thinking church warden launched a fundraising campaign via the online village noticeboard. Within 72hrs the full cost of refurbishment was met. Work has begun to see the bell refurbished.

Bill who is the 95 yr old bellringer is thrilled about it all and the Vicar is equally delighted - hopefully he’ll be on time with starting the service again!



This example of the actual story has all the key elements. You’ve just turned it into something that’s exciting, is about real people and has a positive feel to it.

You’ve provided details, there’s a narrative arc with all the elements of the story arc and you’ve even identified that you might have two spokespeople that could offer quotes.

This story pitch would work for Radio and if you wrote it up as full press release, it would work for print media too.

As to TV it’s what news planning desks refer to as a nice story filler. Realistically, it is not necessary something regional BBC or ITV planning desk will jump at or willing send a crew out to cover, unless it’s got something extra exceptional to add to the angle – however, if the planning desk have a camera crew in the area, they’re more likely to be persuaded to film it but be warned TV can still ditch things at the 11th hour, which is one of the greatest frustrations of working with any broadcast media.

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Photos and film clips

Point three on my listorial is thinking about the imagery that you'll use to illustrate the story you've just built.

This is one of the most important things you can do to really help bring a story to life and ensure that it might get coverage in print or used by a busy planning desk to fill the weekend news schedule. Don't forget that these days, TV and Radio have online news and even if they don't carry the story on their broadcast channels for viewers or listeners they might still use the story for their online broadcast digital news channels.

If you're providing a photograph try and make sure you follow a few simple tips. Most importantly that the photo is in focus. Don't chop off heads or feet or if you do try to frame the photo so it has a central focal point. Try to think about how the photo represents the story and includes the people it refers to. Most importantly please make sure that you have permission to share the photograph. If it includes people (including children) you will need them to sign a consent form before you send it to any journalist or post it online!

So that brings me to the end of my three point listorial for creating and sharing a good media story – I hope it's demystified some of the work we do in PR. I hope these simple pointers help you think about your good news and encourages you to share something that's happening in your church.

If you're looking for help on who and when to pitch it to media, do get in touch, we're always happy to use our contacts. We can also offer advice or support on whether something is news worthy - just give us a call or drop us an email.

